FBI spied on students, report reveals

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — The FBI conducted surveillance at 15 Iowa colleges for more than 20 years, focusing on black students, women's rights' groups and others, the Des Moines Register reported Sunday.

In a copyright story, the newspaper said details of the spying is contained in more than 700 pages of heavily censored government documents released under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, on a request from the Register.

The documents, dating from 1957 to 1979, show that black students were frequently subjects of FBI investigations, the paper said. One 1970 memo said all groups "organized to project the demands of black students ... are to be subjects of discreet preliminary inquiries. These inquiries are to be ... carefully conducted to avoid criticism."

The documents also show that the women's rights movement was watched on campuses, that the FBI often used informants within universities to aid its surveillance and that some students were subjects of the FBI's counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO.

In 1969, an agent reported to then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that women attending the University of Iowa had protested for better access to contraceptives. The agent described the students as "girls seeking sexual fulfillment outside the sacred bonds of marriage."

The agency conducted inquiries at the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, the University of Northern Iowa, and several smaller schools, including Drake University, the University of Dubuque and Luther, Parsons, Iowa Wesleyan, Coe, Simpson, Grinnell, Central, William Penn, Grand View and Wartburg colleges.

Several top university officials said they were surprised to learn the FBI had spied on their campuses.

"This is news to me," said Wilbur Layton, vice president for student affairs at ISU from 1967 to 1976. "The federal government was awfully insecure and uneasy at that time."

Herb Hawkins, chief of the FBI's field office in Omaha, said the bureau's current director has made "tremendous steps" in trying to get FBI agents to understand their roles "and that they are not to be out on witch hunts."